

I Melt With You by EvieSmallwood

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Summary:

The summer of 1987 changes a lot of things in their little group. They grow up; more than they expected and in more ways than one.

I Melt With You

Author's Note:

eyes the word count

uhhh... my hand slipped?

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one

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"You have no idea what the hell you're doing, huh?"

Mike's head snaps up from the mess in his lap. He scowls at her, raising the chain and shaking it. "Does *this* look like I don't know what I'm doing?"

El blinks unabashedly. "Yes."

His cheeks flame. "Liar," he says. "It looks fantastic. Doesn't it, Holly?"

"No," Holly replies around her sandwich. "Looks like crap."

Her boyfriend's scowl deepens. "You aren't allowed to say crap."

"I'm seven."

"You're two," he corrects.

"*Seven.*"

"Two."

"Seven!"

"*Two!*"

"You're both two," El grabs the sad attempt at a crown from Mike and scans it to see what can be salvaged. Not much, given the now ruined stems and loose knots. "Holly, we need more flowers."

Holly nods, sets aside her lunch, and salutes before running off obediently.

Mike huffs, very audibly. El doesn't pay him any mind as she gently untangles a few daisies. It's a beautiful summer day, the beginnings of warmer weather just starting to make a presence. June, El decides, is the best month of vacation; there's so much left to do, and so much time to do it. It's bright, and blue, and beautiful.

"Humph," Mike flops onto his back. He pulls at a string in the faded pink blanket Holly had brought along with them, staring right at her.

"If you're trying to get my attention, it won't work."

"Oh?"

"I'm very busy," she affirms.

"Like, how busy?"

"Super."

She starts just a touch as his fingers graze her thigh, just brushing along the hem of her shorts. She won't look, though; she refuses. Even after the goosebumps erupt on her skin and she sees his lips twist into a satisfied smile from the corner of her eye, she *won't* do it.

Once she does, she'll be fully sucked in, and then this stupid crown will never be finished.

"Still busy?"

"I'm all booked up until three, I'm afraid," she teases.

Mike whines indignantly, scooting closer. The next thing she knows, his head is in her lap; a solid weight, black curls falling into his eyes (they've turned brown at the ends with the sunlight, how pretty).

He stares up at her with a furrowed brow, eyes dark but glistening. "Don't you love me?"

Oh, God.

El rolls her eyes, drops her arms and gives up right there; features expressing her sheer exasperation (and the tiny bit of adoration) she feels (but no one needs to know about that).

It's probably obvious, though, because she's smiling.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Distracting you," he replies promptly.

She'd be irritated under normal circumstances, but he's grinning up at her, all buoyant and carefree. El feels her resolve melt.

But just as she starts to sink into the moment, let herself be captured by his hope and idiocy and love, Holly runs over.

"Got 'em!"

El takes the bunch gratefully. Mike visibly deflates. He glares at Holly. "You just *had* to have a crown, didn't you?"

"They're cool," she says, and then she squeals; Mike hooks his arms her around her waist and pulls her to him, bending over to blow on her stomach and tickle her.

El watches, unable to look away, as he plays with her. He picks her up and mock-flies her around, making *the worst* airplane noises ever. They're drowned out by her uncontrollable giggling, though. Her face is red and her hair is falling into her eyes. She looks *so happy*, he *makes* her so happy. He's so good with kids.

Oh.

Something clicks in her brain; something unexpected but somehow more than right: *I want that with him.*

And that thought slowly develops into other realisations; *I want to marry him. I want to raise kids with him. I want to have Mike Wheeler's babies.*

She should so not be thinking anything like this at sixteen—not something so... intimate. But she is anyway. *Of course.*

How can she not? El wonders, grinning as he chases Holly around the park. It's so picturesque, yet so foreign.

El bites her tongue and ducks her head, forcing herself to focus on the task she'd taken up. Slowly but surely, El weaves the flowers—yellow daffodils, white daisies, plucks of baby's breath.

Babies.

Babies with eyes like his; dark brown and soulful. Maybe with his hair, or hers. Definitely curly, that would be unavoidable. Babies with the last name Wheeler. Babies who grow up into cute, tiny toddlers and climb on their backs and laps and ask them questions and fall asleep in their bed with them—

“Hey, shortstack?”

El jumps. “Hmm? What?”

“Can you hand me a water?” Mike asks, totally out of breath.

Oh. Right.

El does so; and she really, *really* tries not to stare as he downs the thing in like five seconds flat, adam's apple moving as he swallows, head tilted back.

He caps it, wiping his wet lips, and frowns. “You okay?”

She really *did* try not to stare.

“Yeah,” El blushes. “Totally good. Where's Holly?”

“Swings,” Mike drops down beside her. “You know, you're not subtle.”

Her eyes widen, and she hopes to god she wasn't projecting those thoughts, *holy shit*—

(Play it cool. Play it cool.)

“Yeah?”

He doesn't even answer. At least, the answer isn't verbal; it comes in the form of his lips meeting hers. The kiss is soft at first, mostly because she's so stunned it's a little one-sided.

But then, El finds an opening. She slips into the rhythm of her mouth moving against his, arms curling around his neck. Mike pulls her into his lap just as she deepens the kiss and the next thing she knows, he's fallen onto his back (lost his balance, the nerd) and she's looming over him.

El grins. "What was that for?"

He pushes a flyaway from her face, perfectly gentle, completely adoring. "I just wanted to," he replies.

He's so close, and her heart is pounding. El leans in and kisses him again. This time, it lasts longer. His hand squeezes her side, and their tongues move together. She sighs against his mouth as she sinks down lower, pressing her torso against his.

"You two are so disgusting!"

They break away, turning to Holly. She looks like a mini diva, with her arms folded over her chest and one Sketcher-ed foot sticking out.

"You'll get it one day," Mike says. His eyes widen. "Actually, I take that back. Never try to understand. Kissing is gross."

Holly nods sagely. "Boys have cooties."

"They do," he agrees. "So many. They're so nasty. Stay away from them."

El stifles a laugh. "Oh my god, Mike."

"You could catch a disease from him," Holly warns.

"Oh, no," Mike pulls El down by the waist, "El's immune."

"I like his cooties," El agrees.

Holly wrinkles her nose. "Are you two gonna get married?"

El turns back to Mike with raised eyebrows, and she only means to be teasing, but he blushes. A lot.

“Um,” he says.

Oh my god. Oh my god. What?!

“Maybe,” El manages, around her closed up throat. “One day.”

He looks like she just handed him the moon. “Seriously?”

“I said *maybe*,” she repeats.

Holly makes a sound that resembles a retch. “Yuck.”

Mike is still staring at her, almost like he’s seeing her for the first time, or in a new light. And really, she can’t help but feel the same. He may or may not want to marry her, he looks a little bit like he wants to devour her, and with the way the sun is hitting his skin (so bright it almost erases his freckles), he’s completely gorgeous. It’s too much.

“Oh, you finished it!”

Holly rushes over and picks up the crown, placing it on her head. It’s a little too big, but when she tilts it, the band doesn’t fall.

She twirls. “Pretty?”

“Beautiful,” Mike affirms.

El notes the way his eyes flit from his little sister to her, the word lilting up at the end when his gaze falls on her face, turning just a bit awed.

Holly squeaks. “You try it, Mikey!”

“Hmm? What?”

“The crown!” Holly pulls it off her head. “Put it on!”

“No thanks,” he says, far too quickly.

The grin that splits El's face is positively devious. "You don't wanna wear the crown I made?"

Mike opens and closes his mouth. "Um—"

Holly catches El's eye. She passes over the crown. Mike inhales sharply. Then he's rolling out from under her, struggling to get away.

El tackles him, pinning his arms behind his head.

"Any other time," Mike rasps, "And I'd thank you."

She situates herself so that she's sitting on his chest, keeps his arms down with her powers (Holly won't notice) and watches his cheeks colour. It's honestly so satisfying.

Holly plops down, grinning. "Put it on, put it on, put it on!"

El does.

Oh.

He looks so cute.

The flowers stand out against his hair. He's pouting up at her, still blushing against his freckles.

"Rude," he chastises.

El shakes her head, beaming. "I'm taking a picture."

"What?! *No!*"

Holly jumps to action so El doesn't have to even shift her weight. The Polaroid is handed over swiftly (bless her), and the little girl giggles gleefully.

"El," Mike looks stricken, "please."

"Nope," El squints through the viewfinder, "I need to document this moment."

His lip puckers out, *fuck*, he's adorable.

El snaps it right then, quickly grabbing the photo and shielding it so that it doesn't turn out too exposed.

"You better not show that to anyone," he warns.

"I'm putting it up in my room."

"El! No!"

Again, he's twisting and writhing. El keeps him down, extending the invisible weight from his arms to his legs. He grunts unhappily.

"You're no fun," Holly decides.

Then she pokes his side. Mike gasps and laughs. *Cute, cute, cute.*

El takes a picture of that, too; of his smile and the way he glows and how on earth is he so perfect?

"I'm so not marrying you."

"Uh-huh," El takes another photo. "I love you too, Mikey-Moo."

His eyes widen.

"*Mikey-Moo?!*" Holly inquires.

"She thinks you're serious," he says. "Clarify. She's lying. It's not a real nickname, Holly, I—"

El clamps her hand over his mouth. "It's his favourite nickname," she says. Mike makes a strangled sound. "Whenever we're around our friends, call him that. He'll *love* it."

Holly nods dutifully.

El removes her hand. Mike is heaving, but grinning. They both are. "I can't believe you," he gripes.

She snaps one more picture of his crooked half-smile.

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“As you advance through the abandoned village, your skin starts to crawl. You feel... something. Something off. But even as you look around, there’s nothing out of place. The dust has settled. The bones of the buildings have stopped creaking a long time ago. It’s *dead*.”

They lean forward—a collective—all entranced as Mike moves into his narrative. It’s always fascinating to see him slip into this mode of himself; so rarely used audibly these days, as with extracurricular activities and school, they hardly have time for D&D games.

But it’s summer, now. That means twelve-hour long campaigns and movie nights and sleepovers.

El loves it. She feels thirteen, again.

“Dustin, at the forefront of the group, reaches into his bag of holding and procures the Light of Garamya. He holds it outward, and that’s when you see it—”

“Mike, come up here, please!”

They all break off with their own separate groans. El slumps in disappointment.

“*Jesus Christ*,” Mike huffs. “Coming!” He turns to them. “Be right back, guys. No peeking.”

He runs up the stairs, and the room explodes with the bickering of their friends. El keeps her eyes on Mike until he’s out of sight, but then Max nudges her.

“So?”

El frowns. “So... what?”

“So have you and Mike,” she gestures with her hand, “*y’know*. Have you?”

El feels her cheeks flame. “No,” she whispers back. “Not yet.”

They'd come super, super close, though. Like, she's almost certain they would have if Mrs. Wheeler hadn't come home.

Her mind drifts to the other day; in his bed, pressed against him, skin flushed and eyes wide as he'd worked his way down her neck and chest.

Scratch that, they *definitely* would have.

El shakes the thought away, though. "What about you and Lucas?"

Max shrugs miserably. "We've done some stuff," she confesses. "But not 'it'. Not yet."

El shoots her a sympathetic glance. She knows Max has been ready for a while—like, without a doubt, one-hundred percent certain ready—but Lucas has been busy with his job, and Max keeps getting double shifts at the diner. They either never have time or they're too tired.

"Are you guys talking about sex?"

It's Dustin who makes the inquiry, eyeing them with suspicion.

El and Max exchange a glance. The redhead leans forward. "Why? Pornos not enough for you, Henderson?"

"Oh my god," he looks well and truly disgusted. "I *don't* watch porn. I'll have you know, pornography is a vast dramatisation of the real thing—"

"And you know that from experience?" Lucas snickers.

"Shh," Dustin waves him off, "my point is, it's innacurate."

"It's not about accuracy," Max says. "God, if you're so uptight, go watch the school's sex ed video again."

Lucas and Will burst into laughter. El rolls her eyes at all of them. "Everyone stop," she says. "Dustin isn't wrong—"

"Thank you, El—"

"How do you know about porn?" Lucas asks, eyebrows raised and grinning. "Have you and Mike been spicing things up?"

"Ew, oh my god, leave her alone," Max swats Lucas in the arm.

"What?! You're allowed to ask about their sex life, but I'm not?!"

"I'm her best friend!"

"Mike is mine!"

Dustin clears his throat. "Um, excuse me—"

"Guys!" Will's voice breaks through them all. He looks like he's about to strangle each one of them in turn. "Can we not talk about my sister having sex in front of me, please?"

Lucas wrinkles his nose. "You guys aren't even related yet."

"It's only a matter of time," El says, in unison with Will. He tosses her a grave look.

Dustin sighs. "Okay, this conversation is just gross," he decides. "I know we're close, but are we really *that* close?"

Max shrugs. "I like to think so."

"You're a girl," Dustin counters. "And... a girl."

Max rolls her eyes so hard El is amazed they don't fall out of her head. "Y'know, this stupid stigmatism that guys can't talk about emotions or personal stuff is complete bullshit. You're all perfectly capable. You have mouths, you have feelings. You're just *stupid*."

"Suddenly," Dustin glances between Lucas and Max, "I feel like this isn't about me."

Lucas smacks Dustin upside the head. "Man, shut up."

"It is about you," Max insists, cheeks flaming. She's on a roll, now. "It's about *all* of you! All you do is bottle up what you feel until you explode on people and it's totally uncalled for, but if you'd just learn

to *manage your emotions*—”

“Oh, like you don’t do the exact same thing,” Lucas counters, glaring. “Plus, you lie about how you feel. You pretend not to like stuff you actually do, or you say you like something when you don’t! Do you have any idea how confusing that is?!”

Will swallows. “Maybe you guys should go outside...?”

“Oh, *fuck that!* I only do it so you don’t feel bad! Excuse me for trying to spare your precious feelings!”

“Okay,” Will nods. “So, no, then.”

“So you *admit* I have feelings!”

She slaps her hand on the table and the whole thing shakes. “I never said you didn’t! I said you push shit down and *pretend* you don’t!”

The three of them are watching the argument like a tennis match. El’s eyes are wide; she’s seen Lucas and Max fight before, of course, but not like this. They’re both yelling at the top of their lungs, and all El can think is: *what on earth is happening?!*

“What the hell is going on?!”

Mike’s question cuts their voices short. They all swivel around to see him standing on the second to last step, eyes wide.

Oh, thank god.

“Honestly,” Dustin shakes his head, “your guess is as good as mine.”

“Okay,” he says, slowly, finishing his descent. “Would either of you like to share with the class?”

Max blinks. Lucas wipes a hand down his face. They both seem to curl into themselves.

El bites her lip. “Max?” She grabs her friend by the arm. “Come outside with me.”

She looks more than embarrassed. It only makes El more worried, because Max is so rarely embarrassed by anything.

And so she takes her hand and leads her outside, noting the pleading, significant look Lucas throws her.

They step onto the back porch, which is really just a square of concrete. The night air is cool and crisp. El can see the stars clearly against their navy blue backdrop, just brushed by the tops of the trees, it seems like.

“So,” she refocuses on Max, who’s scuffing her sneaker against the ground. “What happened?”

It comes out in one tumbling, regretful go.

“Lucas did some stuff and I didn’t like it, but I said I did and I know that was stupid, I just didn’t want to make him upset, you know? But when he tried to do it again, I said I didn’t want him to, and he got upset because he was worried he hurt me, and that’s so stupid, I mean, it was my choice to lie. And it’s not like I hated it, it was just... a lot, at the time.”

The explanation is more than vague, but El pieces of together. She wraps her arm around Max and pulls the distraught girl closer. “It’s okay,” she says.

“No, it’s not,” she sobs. She’s *crying*. “Because now he thinks I lied about everything. He thinks I don’t want to be with him and it’s not true.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“Yeah,” Max scoffs, wiping her nose, “and he said, ‘bullshit’, and then he left.”

“And you’ve just been keeping this in all night?”

“It’s the first D&D game of summer,” Max says. Then she scowls. “God, I’m such a nerd.”

“Yeah,” El agrees. “I know. We all know.”

Max gives her a light shove. “Shut up,” she says.

El decides to move on, into the area she’s best suited; giving advice. She doesn’t know why anyone would listen, but apparently it works a lot. “Listen, Max,” she swallows, “Lucas wouldn’t do anything if you didn’t want it, and you know that. You don’t have to be afraid of hurting his feelings. This whole thing’ll blow over, okay? It’ll be fine. Just tell him how you feel.”

Max stubbornly rubs away her tears. “What if he doesn’t listen?”

“He will.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ll kick his ass if he doesn’t.”

Max laughs. “Yeah, okay,” she shrugs. “I’d help with that.”

El pulls her in for a last hug, before walking her back inside.

The guys are clearing up the table—Dustin is shoving his notes in his backpack, Will is tidying up the cups, Mike is putting away his dice.

Lucas comes out of the bathroom just as Max closes the back door. Everyone freezes.

“So,” Lucas shifts from foot to foot.

Max pushes her hair from her eyes. “Walk you home?”

The effect is immediate; his face lights up with hope and he nods. “Yeah. Totally. Let me just grab my—” he ducks down and yanks his backpack off the ground. “Okay.”

El gives Max’s hand a reassuring squeeze. Max smiles, takes Lucas by the wrist, and pulls him upstairs.

Dustin lets loose a low whistle as soon as they’re out of earshot. “Jesus.”

“You can say that again,” Will says.

“Jesus,” Dustin repeats.

Will flips him off. “Okay,” he turns to El. “Ready?”

“I, um,” El swallows. “I wanted to talk to Mike.”

“Aww, the lovebirds want a moment alone,” Dustin teases (and really, it’s pathetic as far as teasing goes; like, sixth grade level and just sad so why the fuck is El blushing). “C’mon, William, I’ll give you a ride.”

“You sure? I can walk.”

A collective pause, an automatic reaction. They tense as one.

Will huffs. “Guys,” he says, “that has to stop happening.”

“Sorry!” Dustin throws his hands up. “Force of habit, try to break it, hope I make it.”

Mike furrows his brow. “What?”

“Yeah, that’s right, I just made that up on the spot,” Dustin grins. “It’s called improv, my good friend, and I’m a master at it.”

“Uh huh,” Will and Mike both nod.

“What? I’m talented! I have skills!”

“Yeah.”

“It’s true! Right, El? Ask El!”

El tries to choke down a laugh. “So many talents,” she affirms.

“See? I’m a pro. Now, come on, Byers. You can sleep at my place tonight. My mom’s making cookies, and Steve is coming over.”

Will grins. “Yeah, okay, my night just got infinitely cooler,” he decides. “Have fun being gross, don’t tell me about it ever.”

They run up the stairs together, shoes thumping on wood. El waits until the basement door slams shut.

She sinks down onto the comfortable, familiar blankets that make up the base of the fort and holds out her hand. "C'mere, Stringy."

Mike walks over. El pulls him down so that they're sitting across from one another, knee to knee.

She traces his jawline with her finger. "I don't ever want to fight like that," she tells him.

Mike frowns. "We fight," he points out.

"No, I know, I mean," El sighs, "about what they did. So I... I want to be honest, and we need to be clear, okay?"

He nods. "Yeah, of course."

Her heart is slamming against her rib cage and her palms are sweating, so she takes his in her own. "So I need to know," she bites her lip. "Do you want to have sex?"

"Oh," he pales, flushes, and swallows. "*Oh*. Um..."

"Not like, now," El clarifies.

"No, obviously," he rubs the back of his neck with one hand, but keeps his other firmly in her grip, for which she's grateful. "I just... I wasn't expecting..."

"I want to have sex with you," she throws out, after his hesitance creates a silence. Mike goes even redder, but she pays no mind (well, a little mind; it's cute). She has to get this out. "We almost did the other day, and so I've been thinking about it, y'know?"

He licks his lips. "Thinking about it?"

"Yes," she nods. "A lot. And I really, really want to. But I mean, if you're not ready, I'll wait."

"Oh!" Mike's eyes widen. "No, I... I want to have sex with you, too. Whenever, y'know. Wherever. Any day, any time. Um... Are you sure?"

She can't help but laugh. "Yeah," she nods. "Definitely."

He glances down at their hands, running his thumb over her knuckles. "Promise?"

El rests her forehead against his own. "Promise."

Mike tilts her chin, staring right into her eyes (she's magnetised, mesmerised by his own, the way they seem to dance in the dim light). "Think it'll suck?"

El shrugs. "I've heard it does the first time, sorta," she confesses. "But it gets better."

Mike hums. His lips are almost against her own. When he speaks, they brush hers. "Anything with you'll be good though," he says. "Even if you're like, super, super awful at it."

She laughs as he pushes her back against the pillows, pressing kisses to her neck. "If anyone's gonna suck, it's you."

"Please," he sucks her collarbone, makes her gasp. "I have so much practise."

"Oh, all those other girls you've been seeing?"

"No," Mike grins up at her, "I was talking about my right hand."

El bursts into a new round of giggles, which go breathless as he starts kissing her stomach, pushing her shirt up. She's not even wearing a cami under it, given the heat.

And so, in one swift movement she tugs it over her head, revealing the plain white bra she's had for months; might as well.

Maybe what she's wearing isn't special, but *this* is.

Mike stares at her. His lips are parted just slightly and his pupils are blown, and she can see his breathing quicken.

It's amazing.

(*She's amazing*, he thinks quietly)

"You okay?"

He doesn't reply; Mike leans down and kisses her so hard she actually forgets who she is and where she's from. There's nothing but this, him hungrily moving his mouth against her own, one hand in her hair, the other rising steadily higher up her back before finally making contact with the clasp of her bra.

"Michael, El's dad is here!"

Fuck.

Mike rips away from her with a groan. He closes his eyes. "I swear to god."

"I'll be up!" El yells, as steadily as she can. She then refocuses on him, propping herself up on one elbow. "Get a last look, stringbean."

He looks. He grins. "I like what I see."

"Mmhm," she smiles. "Hand me my shirt?"

"Hmm?" he cocks his head, "In a sec, I need to memorise this angle ___"

"Mike!"

"Okay," he reaches for her shirt, having to lean over her to do so. El resists the overpowering urge to just wrap her arms around him and not let go, never leave. They could stay in this fort forever, doing awful, awful things.

"Here," he hands her the garment.

El slips it over her head. Mike pouts.

"I have to go," she says uselessly.

"Yeah," he presses his lips to her cheek. And then to the corner of her mouth. Then he's kissing her again.

“Mike,” El leans back, but he captures her mouth again. She tilts her head, which only causes him to refocus on her neck. Oh, god. “Mike, seriously, I have to go.”

“Mike! I’m serious! The Chief is outside!”

Mike flops dramatically onto his back. “Okay, fine, leave me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Why don’t you put that right hand to good use?”

He sputters as she pecks his cheek, and then El is running up the stairs two at a time.

Karen is chopping vegetables in the kitchen. She gives El a mildly reprimanding look. “Have fun?”

El grabs an apple from the bowl, trying for a casual smile. “Always. Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler.”

Then she’s out the door, rushing down the walk toward Hop’s Blazer. When El tries the door, it won’t open.

Hopper glares at her through the window. ‘*You can wait,*’ he mouths.

El purses her lips, jerks her chin, and hears the lock click. Satisfied, she yanks the handle.

He’s silent as she clambers inside, but as soon as the door is shut, he speaks.

“Shirt’s on inside out.”

El’s gaze flies to the hems, but the seams aren’t visible. She glares. “Liar.”

Hop is grinning. “I knew it,” he says as he pulls away from the house. “You and Wheeler were getting frisky in the basement—”

“Dad!”

“You’re so gross,” he’s still smiling, so she knows he’s not actually mad. “Sometimes, I think, what would it be like if my kid had class

—”

“Hop.”

“You’re late, you’re a mess, you’re mean to me—”

“Dad.”

Hopper rolls his eyes. “What, you got somethin’ to say?”

“Your shirt is buttoned wrong.”

It actually is. His eyes widen, flitting downward in horror as he realises that *oh, she’s not just fucking with him.*

El rests her elbow on the seat and puts her chin in her hand. “So how’s Joyce?”

“You’re lucky I’m driving, kid.”

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three

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Mike’s sixteenth birthday is fast approaching and then upon them with a startling suddenness. It’s like El blinks and the next thing she knows, it’s the day before and she’s standing in her bathroom, staring at her reflection in the mirror.

“Are your eyes closed?”

“Yes,” comes Max’s exasperated voice.

“Promise?”

“El, oh my god, just come out.”

El swallows, smooths down the flowy material, and then does just that.

Max is perched on the end of her bed, head tilted back and eyes, indeed, closed. Her shoes run over the carpet.

“Okay,” El says. “Open.”

“*Oh. My. God.*” Max’s jaw drops. She shakes her head, blinks, and then grins. “You’re gonna kill him before he’s even a real man.”

El blushes. “Shut up.”

“Or is that the plan, huh? To *make* him a man?”

El grabs the nearest thing—a used tealight for a candle—and throws it at Max. “That is not the plan.”

It’s sort of the plan.

Max hums doubtfully. “Well, you’re gonna knock is nerdy ass socks off,” she says. “God, where did you even *find* that?”

“Nancy,” El says, turning to the mirror against her wall.

At that, Max’s nose wrinkles. “Nance wore that? His *sister*?”

“No,” El gathers her hair and pulls it up, and then drops it. She can decide which works best. “Nancy *sent* it, for my birthday.”

“Up,” Max says, catching on, “and thank god, because that would’ve been weird. I mean, it was different when you guys were like thirteen, and he wasn’t planning on undressing you, and stuff, but—”

“So how’s things with Lucas?”

Her friend sets her jaw stubbornly. “Rude,” she scolds. “And fine.”

“Just fine?”

“They’re dandy,” Max huffs, before falling back on the bed. El comes over and lies down beside her. “We broke up.”

“*What?! Again?*”

“Yeah,” the redhead rolls her eyes. “I don’t know if it’ll last, but... yeah.”

“Why?”

Blue, tearful eyes find El's. "Too much fighting," she laments. "He said he needed a break, and it wasn't working."

El grabs Max's hand. "It'll be okay."

"Will it? Because we keep doing this. We go in circles and we fuck up and sometimes—" Max breaks off with a sharp breath, "—sometimes it feels like... he only keeps it going for everyone else. For the Party. It's like I'm some... *sentiment*, y'know? Too many fond memories, can't get rid of me. But he doesn't *want* me."

"That's bullshit," El says, forcefully. It really is; she's seen the way Lucas looks at Max. She's seen the way they make each other laugh, lean on each other when stuff gets tough. It's too late in the game for them to bite the bullet; they're already in love.

Max huffs. "Maybe," she allows. Then she wipes her cheeks. "C'mon, I'll show you how to do that hairstyle you like."

The next day, she's standing in front of the Wheeler house, a present in her hands and Hop at her side.

"When is this thing supposed to end, again?"

"We haven't even *gone in*, yet."

"Yeah," he nods, "but you don't have to spend the afternoon with fucking Ted, while he goes on, and on, and on, and *on* about..." Hopper frowns. "You know, I can't even remember what the hell it is he talks about? Never shuts up though. Did you ring the doorbell?"

"Yes." El knocks, though, for good measure.

It opens within seconds, though. Nancy stands on the other side, wearing a blue dress that almost matches El's completely. She grins and launches herself at the younger girl. "Oh my god," she says. "You're wearing it."

"It looks good, right?"

She can't remember the last time she felt so self-conscious about

something like this. *It's just a dress.*

"Amazing," Nancy gushes. "Do a twirl?"

El obliges. The light pink skirt flows effortlessly around her, swaying back into place as she comes to a halt.

"You're gonna kill him," Hop and Nance say together.

El rolls her eyes. "I am not."

Hopper raises his eyebrows. "I'd be impressed if he didn't die on the spot."

Nancy snorts. "Come on, party's this way."

It's not really a party, so much as a small gathering of the literal Party. Dustin, Lucas, Will, and Max are all spread out on the living room furniture—feet up and slouched despite the slightly dressier clothing they all wear.

Max is in a yellow sundress, but she's thrown a hoodie over it despite the eighty degree heat. The boys are all in button downs and slacks.

It had been Karen and Nancy's idea to get them all to dress more formally; *it was going to be a nice dinner, and they were going to act like adults*, and no, *Michael was not exempt just because it's his birthday.*

"Where's Mike?" El asks, as Hopper drifts off to find Karen (or, more likely, the alcohol). He departs with a halfhearted wave that comes across more dismissive.

"Downstairs," Dustin says around a mouthful of popcorn. His eyes are glued to the television.

El frowns. "What's he doing down there?"

"Stuff," Lucas replies vaguely. He, too, won't tear his eyes from the screen. Until— "Why, got a present for him?"

Will sends a warning glance. "Guys."

Dustin wiggles his eyebrows, completely ignoring it. "I think it's a card," he says, laughing stupidly.

Max aims kicks at both of them, El rolls her eyes, and Nancy wrinkles her nose. "That's my brother you're talking about."

"Pfft," Dustin relaxes into the couch after avoiding Max's shoe. "You can't deny it's so obvious they want to get into each other's pants."

El thrusts a hand out. The popcorn explodes from the bowl and goes flying across his face and chest.

"Ah! Hey!"

"Deserved it," Will mutters into his own bowl.

"You're all disgusting," she decides, though there's no real malice in it. Just irritation. Heavy, unmatched irritation. "I'm gonna find Mike."

"I was eating that!" Dustin calls after her. "Hey!"

She ignores him. El head straight for the basement stairs, but stops. Her eyes catch on the wrapped gifts that pile the dining room table. Warily, hesitantly, she walks over and adds hers to the stack.

What if he hates it?

She snatches it back.

He won't hate it. It's fine. It's a good gift.

She puts it down again.

But what if—

No. El stops herself, sucks in a deep breath, and turns determinedly away from the gifts.

Basement. Mike.

He's pacing back and forth across the wooden floors, chewing on the end of a pencil. In his hand, he has a spiral notebook.

She can't help but soak up the sight of him in a white button down and black slacks. The sleeves are rolled up to his elbow, and his hair is shining from the small amount of sunlight that pools through the windows near the ceiling. He looks tall, handsome... *grown up*.

"Hey," she greets, hoping her voice doesn't come across as shaky as it feels.

El isn't prepared for the writing utensil to fall from his limp grip and clatter on the ground. Mike starts at the sound, but he never moves his eyes from her. His lips are parted. "Hey," he breathes. "You look... so pretty."

"Yeah?" El does the twirl, even if she isn't sure why. "So do you," she says, when she's finished.

Mike's cheeks are red. "Thanks."

"So," El descends the rest of the way, a little more at ease now that she knows she doesn't look stupid or overdressed or not good enough, "what are you working on?"

"Uh," Mike blinks. He's still staring at her. "Um. What?"

She can't, or won't, stop the grin that splits her face. She reaches up and taps his forehead. "Everything still working in there?"

Mike bites his lip. "I don't know," he answers, and it sounds less like a joke and more like an honest confession.

El lets her arm fall across his shoulder. The other matches it. She stands on her tiptoes as he leans down to meet her and presses a soft, sweet kiss to his lips. "Happy Birthday, Mike."

He brushes her nose with his, mouth hovering close, eyelashes dark and fluttering over his cheeks.

"Thanks, Shortstack." He settles back a little, observing her with a coy grin. "So what'd you get me?"

"I'm not telling," El twists in his arms, but that only prompts Mike to tighten his grip around her stomach. He starts tickling her. "Mike!

Stop, it's a surprise!"

"Oh, I see," he spins her back around to face him again, "So I can't even guess?"

"No."

Mike studies her face for a second before seemingly coming to a conclusion. "I knew it."

Her eyes widen. "What?"

"You're having sex with me for my birthday," he says, nodding. "Well, I gotta tell you, I appreciate the thought, but that has to be one of the most cliché—"

"I am not," she insists.

(She so is. Probably.)

Mike raises his eyebrows. "So what is it, then?"

"I can't say."

"Why not?"

"Because," is all she can manage before the overwhelming and irresistible urge to kiss him completely compels her. It's impossible not to, when he's looking at her like that; dark, soft, teasing.

Mike makes a small sound of surprise against her lips, and El can't help but think: *I win*.

He's all talk.

Except, maybe he isn't, because the next thing she knows he's hoisting her up and setting her right onto the nearby table, which has thankfully been cleared of most objects.

They're at an almost level height, now. El clenches her legs around his waist, leaning into the bliss of his touch, of his warm mouth.

The taste of him—red vines, remains of butter and salt from popcorn

—is overwhelming. She pulls him harder against her, so that there really is no space. *Wow*.

“Michael! Your father’s home!”

Fucking Ted.

Mike pulls away with an exasperated groan. “*Coming!*” He turns back to El. “Concept: you and I run out the back, get in my car, find someplace quiet—”

“*Mike! Now!*”

His teasing grin fades and his forehead falls against her shoulder. El threads her fingers through his air, wishing she could make it better, or at least easier.

“Don’t wanna,” he moans.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers back, unsure what else to say.

Mike sighs, straightens, and fixes the button she hadn’t even realised she’d undone. “Okay,” he spreads his arms. “Let’s go be miserable and pretend to have fun, I guess.”

The day passes in what feels like a blur. Ted is waiting around in the kitchen when they come upstairs, pestering Karen about their electricity bill or something. When he sees Mike, he offers a half smile, a half hug, and a short clap between the shoulder blades.

“Happy birthday, son,” he says.

Mike smiles, and anyone who doesn’t really know him would be convinced. To El, it’s strained and uncomfortable and it makes her stomach twist. “Thanks, dad.”

It gets better when Holly comes barrelling down the stairs in a frilly purple dress and launches herself right at Mike.

“Happy Birthday, Mikey!”

Mike picks her up (and being picked up by someone who clears over six feet is high, El knows from experience), blowing a raspberry in her stomach amidst her squealing.

“Thank you, Holls,” he says.

After that, everything goes... Okay.

They watch movies in the living room—Hopper occupying a couch seat, purposely on the end farthest from Ted’s Lay-Z-Boy. Only Ted is hardly around; he drifts after Karen as she cooks and cleans and bakes, and they bicker in quiet whispers.

El feels Mike tense beside her whenever their voices raise to a more audible decibel. And so she does what she can; turns up the TV, strikes a conversation with someone that gets him distracted, and holds his hand.

“There’s no way you knew Luke and Leia were related,” Max says to Dustin, about halfway through their viewing of *The Empire Strikes Back*.

“See, you only say that because you don’t have the mind of a deductive genius, like myself—”

Hopper and Will both snort, with Dustin tastefully ignores.

“I saw it right away. Totally knew it was coming.”

“Yeah, and that’s why you wrote a paper on why they were a perfect couple?” Lucas inquires.

“I was just throwing people off the scent!” Dustin exclaims. “George Lucas should be thanking my ass! I kept that shit in the dark for *him*.”

“And I suppose you knew Darth Vader is Luke’s father, too, huh?” Max challenges. “You guessed the greatest reveal in cinematic history?”

Dustin hums. “You betcha.”

“This is too much nerd for me,” Nancy proclaims, rising from the

floor beside Mike and El. “I’m getting a soda. Anyone want anything?”

“Yeah, some alcohol would be great about now,” Mike says bitterly, throwing his chin in the direction of their parents. They seem to be having a quiet, yet passionate argument.

Nancy rolls her eyes. “Shit,” she snaps. “Can’t they go one fucking day?”

“Nope.”

She turns back to Mike, gaze flitting to El’s dad. “I’ll spike your drink,” she decides, lowering her voice, “but just this once.”

Mike beams. “I love you.”

“Yeah, I know, I know—that wasn’t a Star Wars reference.”

“But you knew it could have been,” he calls after her. “It’s in your blood!”

After a while, Karen slips in and announces that dinner is ready. They follow after her, trailing and already tired, half full from snacks.

But their formal attire makes a little more sense when El sees the table; candles and fancy food, and a perfectly frosted chocolate cake. It takes centre stage, displayed on a glass stand.

El can’t eat much, even if the food is delicious (Mike’s favourite; meatloaf and potatoes, which happens to be her favourite, since it was the first home cooked meal she ever ate). She keeps eyeing the re-located stack of presents, eyes picking out the blue-wrapped gift in the midst of the pile. She makes her mind up after a few moments of deliberation.

“So, Michael,” Ted stirs around his peas, “have you saved up for a car, yet?”

A silence falls; the politely quiet murmurs of their friends dying off.

Karen drops her fork. “Ted!”

Oh my god.

The thought reverberates around in El's skull; not her own but no less welcome.

"Not yet," he says, slowly.

"Because you know," Ted goes on, ever the oblivious and straight to the point, "it would really help out your mother and I, not having to share a vehicle."

El can feel the embarrassment rolling off of him in waves. Her own blood boils.

"Ted," Karen says again, lower and more urgently.

"How much do you have saved?"

El doesn't know what to do, how to help. Her friends look just as lost. They're either gaping or staring down at their plates. El catches Hop's eye, forcing him to stop glaring at Ted. She kicks his shin.

Karen downs the rest of her wine and slams the glass on the table.

Do something, El projects.

"A couple grand," Mike says, vaguely.

"Hey, Ted," Hopper readjusts and gives Ted his *'I'm inches from punching you,'* smile. She loves him all the more for it. "Lay off the kid, huh?"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"You presume to tell me how to talk to my son, in my own house, at *my* dinner table?"

Hopper leans back, folding his arms over his chest. "Yeah," he says.

Ted starts to scowl, and it's in that moment El realises that Mike's knuckles are white, and he's afraid; worried not about what Hop

might do but about his own father (about him forbidding Mike from letting Hop in the house ever again, or holding some grudge against El; she sees all of these possibilities flash through his mind in a heartbeat).

Under the table, she squeezes her hand into a fist.

The room goes dark.

“Huh,” El reaches for her soda as innocently as possible. “Power’s out.”

Ted pushes back from the table. “I swear,” he warns, mind already moving on to the next thing, “if they cut our electricity because of that bill, Karen...”

She gives him the most menacing, withering stare. It goes unseen (at least by Ted) though. He walks off to go find the breakers.

Karen throws her towel against her plate. “I’ll go get some more candles,” she says. “Does anyone have a lighter?”

Five are provided within seconds, Zippos and Bics and one that’s actually decent, belonging to Hopper.

Karen takes that one, throwing judgemental glares at her two oldest children. “I don’t want to know why you have those,” she says. Then she softens, focusing on Mike. “I’m so sorry, sweetie.”

Mike pockets his zippo and shrugs. “It’s okay, mom.” She still looks doubtful, and his face turns earnest. “Really, it is.”

Karen sighs. “I hope so,” is all she says, before stalking out.

Dustin salutes El. “Nice move, Jean Grey.”

“Yeah, well,” El shrugs, glaring at Ted’s vacant seat. “Asshole.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Max throws in dryly. “Jesus, like, who asks shit like that? On a day like this?”

Mike and Nancy exchange glances. They turn to Holly. “Cover your

ears,” they say together.

Holly stabs her mashed potatoes and glowers. “Why?”

“Grown up talk,” Mike says.

“I’m seven!”

“You’re two,” Nancy says with finality. “Cover them, Holly.”

The younger girl sighs with all of the exasperation of an excluded little kid, before doing as she’s told.

Nancy then leans forward, running a finger over the rim of her glass. “Dad thinks he’s gonna get laid off,” she confides.

Their faces are masks of shock, but El feels mostly indifference; she’d heard all this last week, wiping away her boyfriend’s tears in the back of his station wagon. She takes his hand now, intertwining their fingers as Nancy goes on.

“The company he works for just merged with this new one, and their employees are all young and they work fast, and he’s, well...”

“Slow,” Mike supplies. “Old. Awful. Fuck, I’d fire him—”

Nancy whacks his chest. “Point is, he’s been super stressed about our finances lately. Gas, food, whatever. I mean, he could easily get another job, probably better than the one he has now, if he’d just think ahead.”

“Wow,” Dustin says.

“Same thing almost happened to my dad a few months ago,” Lucas tells them. “Only half the company bailed out before the merge and they had to keep as many people on as they could.”

“This is why I work alone,” Hopper says, knocking back his drink.

“You have like five deputies,” Dustin protests. “And Flo—who does like, seventy percent of the work there.”

“Watch yourself, Henderson.”

“Can I uncover my ears, now?” Holly wines.

“Yes,” Mike and Nancy say together.

The sound of heels clicking on floor reaches their ears. “Don’t say anything,” Mike warns, and *obviously*.

“Okay,” Karen swoops in, breathless, with an armful of candles. “I’ll light these, and then we can eat the cake. How’s that sound?”

“Delightful,” Dustin says.

“No one asked you,” Max smacks him upside the head.

“It’s great, Mom,” Mike says over their bickering.

She scatters the candles around the dining room, before moving into the cake and lighting that, too.

“Ted!”

Nothing.

“Ted!”

A beat, and then Karen sighs. “Okay, too late. Everyone sing!”

They do. El loops her arm through Mike’s the closest, and he grins dopily at her.

Everyone sees, but no one falters in their singing.

Make a wish.

Don’t need to, he turns to the flames anyway. *I already have you.*

They eat. Ted never returns from the garage, and El suspects he’s hiding there. It’s fucked up to her, but it doesn’t seem to be any skin off Mike’s back.

El slips off to the bathroom halfway through dessert. The pile of gifts is conveniently on the way. El quickly grabs hers off the top and then hurries up to Mike's room, instead. She'll give it to him later, she thinks, setting it on his nightstand.

Only later comes sooner than her racing heart wants. After the cake is finished and Mike opens various presents (sci fi books from Dustin, comics from Max, a new watch from Lucas), they're all clearing out.

They don't even question why El doesn't have anything to give Mike, which makes her scowl, but also, *thank god*.

"Okay," Hopper rises from the table, "so here's the situation: I have to go to the station to do some shit, but I'll be back here at like eleven. Sound alright?"

El nods. "Tell Joyce I said hi," she calls after him.

Hopper flips her the bird on his way out.

"I'm gonna go soak my feet," Karen announces. "Holly, go get ready for bed, okay?"

The blonde groans, slumping all the way back on her seat. "Why?"

"Because it's eight thirty," Karen urges her up, "and your bedtime is nine, and you know that. *Go*."

They both leave; one begrudgingly and the other like it's a great escape.

Nancy pushes her frosting around on her plate. "Hey, Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you have a car yet?"

He frowns. "What?"

"Well I mean, you work minimum wage, right? And you've had your job for like a whole year. You don't have to buy all your food or pay rent, and there's no way you could blow all that on like, arcade or

whatever. So what's the hold up?"

"Y'know," he's blushing and neither one of them know why, "uh, stuff."

"What stuff?" They ask together.

"*Stuff!*" He shoots out of his chair, gathering plates and cups. "Leave me alone."

El and Nancy exchange glances. They rise and follow after him to the kitchen. "What stuff?" They repeat.

"Listen!" He rounds on them, the tips of his ears red. "I'm working on it, okay?"

Nancy's eyes narrow in suspicion. "You're hiding something," she decides. Then she breaks away with an abruptness that startles them both, frantically eyeing the clock. "Did mom say—? Oh, shit, I gotta go."

"Hot date?"

"Yeah, actually," Nancy is already running up the stairs, probably to change. "Jon's getting off work, I wanna surprise him."

Her bedroom door slams shut.

Mike leans against the counter. "Speaking of surprises..."

El huffs. God, he's relentless. "Yeah, okay," she grabs his hand. "Come on."

They go down to the basement, settling on the ratty old sofa where it's quiet, and away. El clutches the retrieved gift in her hands, feeling lightheaded.

"So in art last year, we had to make something for our class project, and—"

"You sculpted me? Oh, El, you shouldn't have."

El rolls her eyes. “No, no,” her hands are shaking as she holds the gift. She can’t stop it; *what if he hates it? What if it’s stupid or random? What if it’s not enough?*

“El,” Mike grabs one of her hands. His brow is furrowed in concern. “What’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing,” she nods, as if trying to convince them both.

“You know, I wasn’t serious about all that stuff before,” he tells her. “You don’t need to worry—”

“It’s not that!” El insists. Her cheeks burn. She holds the gift out. “Just open it, okay?”

Mike gives her a small smile, gently taking it. El’s heart pounds as he slowly and carefully peels back the blue paper, and she wishes suddenly that he were like every other kid and just ripped it off without being so fucking neurotic—

“Oh.”

It’s lying on his lap, staring up at them both; a leather bound, thick journal, soft and supple to the touch. She’d spent two months making it, getting it all just right, hand sewing it and pressing the small inscription into the front cover:

‘For stringbean, love shortstack’

“Oh, my god.”

“It’s for your book,” she tells him, voice still shaking, because his eyes are wide and he hasn’t looked away from the journal. “Or whatever you want, but I made it for your book. I know it’s not a lot, or anything, like expensive—”

She can’t talk anymore, because he’s kissing her. *Hard*. El melts. *Thank god*.

“It’s perfect,” he says when he pulls away. There are tears in his eyes. Mike hugs it to his chest. “I love it so, *so* much. I love you. I can’t—” he shakes his head. “I don’t know what to say.”

He stares down at it some more, smiling with so much fondness she's certain her heart explodes. A tear falls onto the leather. "Oh, shit," he scrambles, wiping it away. "Sorry."

El wipes her eyes. "'S'okay. So you like it?"

He makes some choking, strangled noise and then meets her eyes. She sees so much happiness, there. Pure joy. And she understand suddenly that yes, he loves it. He's so grateful to her for believing in his dreams and working so hard to support them and creating something so beautiful, being so dedicated, being the best girlfriend *ever*.

It's all the stuff he can't say with his mouth, but he feels it, and so she does, too.

"Thank you," he manages.

El shrugs. "Anything for you, stringbean."

Mike sets the journal aside very carefully and then grabs her by the arm, pulling her, and then he hugs her.

His nose is cold against her neck, but his mouth is warm. El sinks into his embrace, putting her legs across his lap and curling into him. It's so good, so sweet.

The Mike jerks. "Sorry," he pulls back, "I just thought of something. Do you have a pen?"

It happens a lot, and it's something she's used to; him getting ideas randomly, sometimes even when he's in the middle of talking. Her eyes scan the basement for anything, landing on a cup of them on the shelf in the back. She yanks them over.

"God, you're so cool."

El grins. She plucks a pen from the cup and hands it over. Mike scrambles for the book and skips the first page, as he always does, and then starts.

She reads over his shoulder, which he hates if it's anyone else:

Sometimes I think, very abruptly, that it would be this way no matter what. Me and her. Her and I. No matter the time, the place, the universe, the plane; souls who are meant to be together, find each other, and stay together (even when they're apart). It doesn't matter who I am or who she is, all that matters is that I'm hers and she's mine, always.

"Okay," he nods, satisfied. "Sorry."

"Don't be fucking sorry, you idiot," she pushes his shoulder, as hard as possible. Mike falls back against the couch cushions with a grunt and looks up at her. His head cocks.

"El—"

She doesn't wait; she *can't* wait. El is filled with the overwhelming urge to kiss him, and she does. Her lips find his own and move with a confidence, a passion. It means something, every move; when his hands let the book fall and grasp her waist instead; when her body ducks, curling to accommodate his height even when he's lying down; when his teeth grate against her lower lip and tug, letting her catch air, before they coalesce once more.

It's hot and it's breathy, completely desperate. Her fingers collide with his hair, grabbing a fistful. She slides higher up his torso and keeps a hand against his heart because she needs to feel it beating.

Mike groans at the movement. His hands inch ever higher, while she starts unbuttoning his shirt.

They break, change tilts, and he comes back with more force. It's electrifying. It's more intense than anything they've ever done before in *some way*, a way she can't quite understand. Mike pulls her body against his. El is lost in the sensation of his fingers just a touch higher than her ribcage, and his tongue against her own.

He smells like cologne; something dark and musky and head-spinning. She can't put her finger on what exactly it is, but it's miles better than what he wore at fifteen and she's certain it's driving her crazy.

Together, they work him out of his shirt. It goes... somewhere. She

won't miss it. El breaks off, panting, to look at him.

(freckles standing out against his flushed cheeks, pupils blown, eyes wide, lips parted in shock and slightly swollen; gorgeous)

She runs her hand up and down his stomach. Mike's eyelids flutter closed.

El swallows. "Can I unbuckle your belt?"

She can feel his muscles tense before his eyes shoot open and his gaze, wild and animal, focuses on her. "What?"

"I said," her tone is lower, voice breathless, "can I unbuckle your belt?"

"Oh."

She doesn't think he's actually seeing her. Mike hesitates, and then nods.

It's just as her fingers are working with the cool silver metal that she hears the telltale footsteps on the basement stairs.

They both freeze. Mary Janes come into view, then the tell-tale purple skirt. Mike lunges for his shirt and El scrambles off of him.

He gets about half the buttons done up by the time Holly is downstairs. She doesn't notice him fixing the rest, though. She's just crying as she rushes up to them.

"They're fighting, again, Mikey," she sobs.

Mike pulls her onto his lap. "It's okay," he wraps his arms around her. El scoots just a touch closer, placing a hand on his back. "It's okay, I promise."

"But it's your *birthday*," Holly whines. "They're not supposed to fight on birthdays."

El's heart sinks. It shouldn't be like this; she shouldn't be relying on the importance of a birthday for security that her parents won't

argue.

Mike buries his face in Holly's hair, and El rests her own on his shoulder. It's not okay, but it's not over.

"Want me to put on a movie?"

Holly snuffles, before nodding tearfully. Mike sets up the old TV and puts a tape in: Sixteen Candles, because that's what his baby sister likes.

He flops down next to El, who's pulled Holly into her lap. Eventually, she finds her way against him, back against torso.

They stay curled up like that, fall asleep like that, and wake up later all stiff and aching, but it's not so bad.

Mike kisses her goodnight just before she steps out to go to her car. The movement is sleepy, but it feels nice.

Not bad at all.

-

four

-

July is scorching.

It burns her skin, makes her just a tiny bit darker. The heat goes to her head and shortens her temper, increases her hunger for certain things (a certain *someone*), but the one thought that prevails over all of the madness is this:

She needs a job.

It's past time, really. Everyone else in their little group has one, and now that El's gotten her license, there's really nothing stopping her.

And then, one particularly hot day, she and Max are skating past the public pool and El sees it.

'HELP WANTED'

El stops, squinting at the sign to make sure she read it correctly. Max keeps going until she realises El isn't with her anymore. She hurries back.

"What—Oh. You wanna work *there*?"

"What's wrong with it?"

To El's eye, it's perfect; blue, blissfully cool water, rippling in the sunlight. There are kids splashing around in it, and a few lifeguards perched around various vantage points. There's one open vacant chair, though.

"There's like... people," Max wrinkles her nose.

"Max, you work at a diner."

"It's different! Crotchety old dudes don't wanna talk."

El raises her eyebrow. "And who here is gonna wanna talk to me?"

"Uhh," Max leans forward, clutching the fence, and points. "That hot guy, that hot guy, that hot guy—"

"Max—"

"And please take notice that none of them are wearing shirts—"

El shoves her, albeit lightly. "Stop," she says. "You're being dramatic. Besides, there's like three other girls working there."

Max hums. "I guess it's worth checking out," she says.

And that's how El winds up in the startlingly chilly front building, where two kids a little older than them are behind a U-shaped desk. One looks up when they walk in. "Hi, how can I help?"

"Uh, hi," El leans over the counter, reassured by Max's steady and annoyed presence beside her. "Is that lifeguard position still open?"

"Yeah!" The receptionist's name is Andy, if her tag is anything to go by. She starts flicking through papers, procuring one. "This is the

application, just fill it out and bring it back to me when you can—today, tomorrow, whatever. Obviously, you'll need to know how to swim," she grins, "I know, ha ha, I'm so funny. Are you a certified lifeguard?"

"No," El says.

"That's okay," Andy nods, "we can certify you. There's a training program you'll have to complete, but it's all free of charge."

"You guys seem pretty desperate," Max comments.

"No kidding," Andy rolls her eyes. "There was all this drama with the last lifeguard and her boyfriend, and they both quit. One position just got filled but we really, *really* need someone else. We have guards working double now and Reggie—he's an early morning guard, you'd be working with him or Katrina, sometimes—he's been doing all the set up by himself."

El frowns down at the application. "So what are the hours?"

"Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. First half of the week you do the morning shift, second half is in the afternoon—like, eight to noon, two to seven. If you want more hours you can always sign up for an additional training course to teach the kiddos, which would be awesome, because we're shorthanded there, too."

"Jesus," Max breathes. Then, "can I have an application?"

Andy's eyes light up. "Oh, my god. Yeah!"

El furrows her brow. "You already have a job."

"I can manage two," Max insists. "Fuck, I could probably leave my shift and no one would notice. Actually, I *have* done that—"

"Here you go," Andy hands it over. "Remember, whenever, but like... as soon as possible."

"Totally," they say together.

A week later, she has a job.

It's a lot, at first.

She's learning and training and getting used to waking up early in the morning again, which sucks, but it's only two days of the week.

Hopper is more than proud when she tells him she got the position; he takes her out for chicken and waffles, ruffles her hair, teases her about going down to the pool and showing off his 'magnificent chest hair', and really, it's all great.

Except Mike is, although happy for her, a tiny bit put out.

"It's just that we'll have less time together," he confesses, when she finally manages to pry something from him. "I mean, it's was gonna happen anyway. It's fine. I'm fine. I'm being stupid."

"You're not being stupid," she assures him, handing the spoon back over.

Mike scoops himself some more ice cream. His brow is glistening with perspiration, and hers probably is too. "It'll be good. We'll be okay," he shrugs. "Plus, it'll be good practise, y'know? For when we're in college and stuff."

She's been meaning to talk to him about that; been meaning to tell them that college, with all its stress and expectations and debt, isn't something she thinks she wants.

But not now. Now is for shovelling her face with ice cream in his quiet, bright kitchen. She takes the spoonful he offers her.

"He's staring again."

"He isn't."

"He is."

"No, he isn't."

"Do you want me to kick his ass for you? Because I will."

El stops short and rounds on Max. “He isn’t staring,” she insists. “And even if he is, it doesn’t matter. Guys always stare.”

“Yeah, but you’re like... in a bathing suit.”

“Shush.”

El leads her down the length of the pool. It’s a calm afternoon, just before the kids’ lessons start. There’s no one around but her, Max, and Reggie.

El doesn’t really like Reggie, much. He’s in college, he’s loud, he’s stubborn and too persistent about things—but she doesn’t hate him, either. She’s sort of... apathetic. She doesn’t care if he thinks she looks cute, or if he stares. It doesn’t matter.

It only matters if *Mike* stares. If *Mike* thinks she’s cute.

Max struggles to keep up with El’s fast, determined pace. “Y’know,” she says, whistle jingling around her neck, “I really could kick his ass.”

“So could I,” El says, reaching the watchtower. She ascends it and grabs the water bottle she left. “I told you, stop it, okay? I don’t want to think about it any more than I have to.”

Max grunts, but lays off. They do the rounds; making sure the pools are clear, the equipment is in order, and then retrieve the kids’ toys from the supply shed.

“Rings?”

“Yup.”

“Floaties?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Noodles?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Max follows El out. She takes the keys and locks the shed, before hurrying over to the shallow end of the kids pool. El has the beginner levels, today, and they’re always the easiest (even if they’re loud and absolutely insane). It’s her last class before the pool closes.

The water only reaches, like, her mid-calf. It gets deeper as it goes along, eventually covering her stomach.

She scatters the rings around the pool as the gates open and the kids flood in.

Five of them rush over to her, squealing and pushing each other. The youngest, Annie, is four, while the oldest (Luke) is nine. It’s a varied group, but they all seem to get along okay.

“Ms. Hopper!” They call, because to them, she’s like, eighty. It always makes her wince.

Polly and Annie are always the most eager to get into the water. Justin is the most hesitant, always needing a bit of urging and assurance.

El helps him in, guiding him down the stairs. “See? Not that deep, you’re fine.”

Justin giggles in that way she’s noticed kids do when they realise their worries are far-fetched.

“Okay,” she turns to her group. “So you guys are gonna be finding rings today, how’s that sound? They’re all in different places. Remember to come up for air when you need to and don’t be afraid to ask for help.”

She keeps her eyes on them, thankful she doesn’t have more than five. It’s almost like watching her own friends.

Polly and Katie find two first, holding them triumphantly aloft. “Got it! Got it!”

Justin blows bubbles, half of his head underwater, and then giggles again.

“Find the rings, kiddo,” she reminds him.

He nods and paddles off.

Annie brings one over. “Here,” she offers shyly.

El takes it with a smile, setting it on the edge of the pool. “Good job,” she says.

Annie beams. She then wades away to join the others, calling loudly that they’re cheating and it’s not fair.

That’s when she spots him.

He’s standing by the entrance, wearing a flimsy white shirt and swimming trunks. He’s with the guys, and they’re all huddled together as they approach, bickering about something.

She can’t make herself look away; with his dark curls falling into his eyes, the way he’s just a tiny bit taller than Lucas now and for some reason that makes her heart skip a beat (*wow, yes, wow*), the way his skin goes all angelic and soft with the sun shining on it.

Mike notices her. He grins when he catches her staring, and El feels her face heat up.

See something you like?

Shut up.

He breaks away from the others and comes over, dropping down to put his legs in the water. “Hey,” he greets.

El grins. “Hi,” she returns. “What’re you doing here?”

“Lucas came to pick up Max,” he says. “I figured I’d tag along, and then so did *everyone* else.”

“Ms. Hopper!” Justin slashed over. “Got the rings,” he says, sounding slightly awed at himself.

“Awesome,” she takes them, counting three of the ten she scattered.

“High five.”

Justin returns it sloppily but giddily. He smiles happily and then turns to Mike. “You’re tall,” he states. “Are you twenty?”

Mike grins. “Nope,” he says.

“Do you drink milk?” Justin scratches his nose. “My mom says I have to if I wanna get bigger, but I don’t like it.”

“You should always listen to your mom,” Mike advises.

“Yeah,” Justin looks put out. “I’m gonna go get more rings, I guess.”

“You do that,” El says. She checks on the others, making sure no ones drowning or dead.

“I can drive you home tonight, if you want?”

“I have to clean up and everything, after,” she says. “You don’t mind waiting?”

“Nope,” he leans back and tilts his head up, basking in the sunlight (or maybe the sunlight is absorbing *him*, relishing in *him*; it would make sense, given she’s ninety percent sure he’s an angel—she’s sort of always suspected that, ever since she learned what the word meant). Sun soaked and bright and perfect. *Dear god.*

“You should go hang out with the guys for now,” El forces herself to say. “I’m just doing boring lifeguard stuff here.”

“I think it’s cute,” he says, with a grin.

Her heart skips a beat. “Still,” she bites her lip. “You’re totally distracting me.”

“Yeah?”

His lips are suddenly inches from her own. *Since when?*

(who cares?)

“Yeah.”

El gives pushes him, lightly, square in the chest. “Go,” she insists. “Before one of these kids drowns.”

“Alright, alright,” he rises, “if lives are at stake, then I suppose I have no choice.”

Then he’s gone, and El is left alone with her job. Suddenly, she finds her energy spiked. Mike is driving her home, she thinks. She gets to spend time with Mike.

The kids finish up after another ten minutes or so, during which El summons them to the middle of the pool and has them float on their backs. A couple still need support, but most of them are fine.

Parents come over with towels and proud smiles, accepting their kids as they come out of the water. El gathers up all of her things and sets them aside, listening to the voice over announce that people have ten minutes to clear out.

She sees him just as he emerges from the water, coming to rest against the concrete wall. The muscles in his back flex with his shoulder blades, clear to her even from a distance. She can’t fucking breathe. *Holy shit.*

Lucas comes up right after. They’re bickering good-naturedly. He looks so... *hot*; beads of water shining and glistening against his jaw, dripping from his slicked back dark hair.

El forces herself to focus on her job, rather than her boyfriend, or they’ll never get out of here.

Max comes over and drops her supplies next to El’s. “The guys and I are gonna catch a movie,” she tells her. “Mike said you had plans, right?”

Plans? As in, more than him just driving her home?

El shrugs. “Yeah,” she says.

“Well, don’t you look enthralled,” the redhead comments.

“No, just thinking,” Lipgloss or lipstick? She’d brought both. She

wants desperately to shower, but forces herself to accept her state as it is. She won't have him waiting around all damn day for her.

Max hums. "Well, call me tonight, okay? Billy's visiting and I need *something* to distract me."

"Definitely," El nods. "See you, MadMax."

She laughs. "Bye, Jean Grey."

El is only just starting to carry some of her gigantic pile of pool supplies back to the shed when Mike—dear god, they're already the last people here—comes over.

"Need help?"

Flushed skin. Freckles. Tall.

"Hmm?"

Mike grins, slow and a little sly. "I said, do you need help?"

El blushes. "Right," She readjusts her noodles. "Yeah, uh, that'd be good."

He grabs what he can carry and follows her back to the shed. El fumbles with the keys, hands shaking, heart pounding, because she's pretty sure something has woken up in her and it's not something that's just gonna go away this time.

"Those go in the back," El tells him. She puts the rest of the stuff in their respectful places, dashing back to grab the last things and returning just as he's found where floaties go.

It's hot. Like, so hot. She can't believe she's already sweating when she just got out of the pool. There's a thick humidity in the air that sticks to her skin, makes her feel lightheaded.

Mike holds up a first aid kit. "This?"

"There," she points over her shoulder.

He brushes past, skin ghosting near her own and practically searing her. El swallows, sucks in a deep breath, and thinks: *okay*.

Then she thrusts her hand out and the shed door slams shut. A twitch of her head and it's locked, too.

Mike frowns. "El?"

She doesn't waste a second; El kisses him, pours all of the things she's kept restrained for so long into it. This kiss is a remembrance of all that they were and are and will be, it's *you found me in the rain, you gave me a home, you love me and I love you*.

His lips move with hers. Her body slips against his. She feels svelte like this, with him so tall, arms around her; one hand already pulling her hair from its scrunchie.

His fingers tangle with her curls, nails scraping her scalp. There's something forceful and hungry and knowledgeable about all of this; they both know where they're going and she has no plans to stop.

There's no one to interrupt.

Mike pushes her against the wall. El gasps. His lips press against her neck, sucking—hard. They go lower, teeth scraping against her skin, and El moans. She wraps an arm around his shoulders and lets her fingers coalesce with his damp hair.

Mike straightens after a minute, only then, he's turning her around; doing the same thing to the back of her neck. She gasps with each burning kiss, the feeling only heightened with his hand on her stomach, felt so clearly through the thin fabric of her bathing suit.

None of her, not one part, wants him to stop.

And so she turns back around, places a small kiss to his chest—the most accessible place given her height—and soaks him in. She soaks in this feeling, shivering a little, running her hands up his bare back. He tastes like chlorine and sweat and salt.

"Okay," she says.

Here. Now. Right now.

The rest is history.

Except it's not, really. It's just part of their story; ten minutes in a pool supply shed with (thankfully) quite soundproof walls.

It doesn't suck. That's one thing for El knows for sure. It's actually really, really good. Like, mind-blowingly, life-changingly *good*.

And it is again five minutes later in the showers when she's trying (epically failing) to get clean.

Oh well.

Later, El lies in bed.

She can't quite get her head around it. She feels different; hell, life feels different. It's like she accomplished something, a good thing. Like she got what she'd been waiting for, for so long.

She can't get past the way he'd smiled at her when she slipped out of his car. The way he'd kissed her—soft and sweet. It still lingers on her lips now, even hours after.

Everywhere he'd touched her still feels like it's on fire.

"El, are you listening to me?"

She readjusts the phone, rolling over onto her side. "Yeah. Neil and Billy. They fought?"

"Yeah, they did, and get this..."

Max goes on to narrate the sequence of events that led to a broken TV and flat tires, and really, the whole thing is so awful.

But El can't stop smiling.

five

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As July fades into August, the weather changes into something resembling decent; they go from sprawled out in Mike's basement—the six of them donning ice packs and crowding around an electric fan—to spending their afternoons actually outside.

And so it doesn't exactly come as a surprise to El when Mike starts asking her out on dates more often, being as they can finally leave a building without burning to a crisp.

Of course, there are other reasons for their sudden frequency in nights out, ones that El has done her absolute best to keep under the radar.

She manages to succeed for weeks on end. It's sort of satisfying, listening to the teasing of their friends and being able to think, I know something you don't know.

It all comes crashing down when El and Max are in her room, trying on the clothes they just bought from the thrift store.

El is shifting in front of the mirror, studying the way the hem of the dress brushes just above her knee (she secretly hopes that'll drive him crazy), when Max gasps.

"Oh my god."

The blood drains from El's head; she already knows before she looks.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"What are these?"

El turns. "What do they look like?"

"Well they fucking look like condoms, El," Max says, much too loudly (thank god Hop's not home). "But I know that can't be right, because we agreed we'd tell each other when it happened, right? And I don't remember you telling me shit, so."

"You sound like one of those moms on TV," is what comes tumbling

out of El's mouth.

Max's eyes widen. "Well... you lied!"

"No," El sighs, flopping down on the end of the bed, "I just didn't tell."

"No," Max flicks a condom wrapper at her, "You promised to tell me and you *didn't*, therefore, you lied when you said you would."

"Can we not get caught up in the technicalities of lying?!" El pleads. "I-there are reasons I didn't tell you, okay?"

Max raises her eyebrows and folds her arms over her chest. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," El scowls. "This is one of them."

"Excuse me?"

"I knew you'd make a big deal out of it," she explains, "and I just... wanted to be able to enjoy it without everyone knowing."

"You think I'd tell?!"

"Not on purpose," El says, "but yeah. I do."

Max huffs. Then she eyes El. "So what's it like, then?"

El can't help it when her lips twist upward; it's an involuntary reaction, because the happiness and the goodness just fills her up. "It's amazing," she says. Then she frowns. "You and Lucas haven't...?"

"Oh, no, we have, I just wanted to know how it is with Wheeler."

El throws a pillow at her. "*Hypocrite!*"

Max laughs. "Stop! It was in the heat of the moment!"

"Yeah," El snorts, falling down next to Max, "tell me about it."

Max raises her eyebrows. "Wait, how long ago?"

"Last month."

“El!”

“Well when did you?!”

“Like, two weeks after that big fight we had.”

“Max!” El whacks her with the pillow again. “I thought you were broken up, anyway?”

“We were,” Max rolls her eyes. “Apparently we still are, but it doesn’t really stop anything. We keep doing it, even if we try not to. God, he’s unbearable.”

El bites her lip to keep from laughing. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

“I can’t believe *you* didn’t tell *me*!”

They’re huddled around Dustin’s screen, watching as he stumbles his way through the *Legend of Zelda*.

“Come on, you son of a bitch,” he mutters. “Come on...”

“Up!” Will shouts.

Lucas winces. “Down, down!”

“Fuck!” He smashes his fist against the side of the machine, eyes wild. “I need more quarters.”

El watched with amusement as Lucas and Will shovel them out like their lives depend on it—but then Mike’s hand slips into hers, and she cranes her neck to see his face, slipping into the world of just him and nothing else.

“Hi,” he says.

El smiles. “Hi,” she returns. He looks ridiculously cute today; it’s not even fair. Maybe it’s because she hasn’t seen him since last night. “How was work?”

Mike shrugs. "Same old, same old," he says. "This new guy, Larry, blew the circuits on the back wall so all the TVs went out. I got to fix that."

Got to. Nerd.

"We just got those new Sega Master systems—oh, and the Tandy 3000 HD, which looks like, way bulky compared to the Mac SE—"

"Mike," El places a hand on his chest to slow his roll, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

He blushes. "Right." A beat. "Do you wanna come outside with me? For a minute?"

She glances back at their friends, who are all absorbed in the game. Then she nods and lets him lead her out.

The night is cool and pleasant against her skin. El breathes, grateful for the fresh air; a welcome contrast to the stuffiness of the arcade.

"You okay?"

Mike lean against the wall, fiddling with his lighter. He doesn't take out a cigarette; El's only seen him smoke twice before in her life, both times after his parents fought in a particularly bad way.

She doesn't like that he's so stressed he's itching for it, though.

"I'm fine," he nods.

El stands beside him. "You're sure?"

"It's just... stuff at home. It'll be fine." He nods again, like he's reassuring himself, and then turns to her. "I wanted to ask you, though: there's this double feature on Friday? At the drive in?"

She's heard; *Top Gun* and *Risky Buisness*. "You wanna go?"

Mike grins. "I mean, if you want to, yeah."

El hums, leaning into his side and wrapping her arms around him.

She wonders absently if, were she to stay like this long enough, she could absorb him through osmosis. “Sounds good.”

Mike kisses the top of her head. “Awesome,” he breathes.

They lean against one another like two pillars until Will comes out to find them.

It isn't good.

The day of their date, El wakes up to stabbing pains in her stomach. It's not perfectly out of the ordinary, though, so she downs a couple of pills and goes about her business; cleans her messy room, works her shift at the pool, and goes home to get ready.

Only it just gets *worse*, even with the medication.

By eight, half an hour before Mike's supposed to pick her up, El is curled up in a ball on the couch with a hot water bottle over her stomach.

Hopper feels her forehead, which makes her roll her eyes. “I'm not sick, Dad,” she says.

“Let me feel important,” he pleads. “Did you call Mike?”

“I can't get up,” she says.

“The phone is three feet away.”

El doesn't change her expression. Hopper groans, grabs the phone, and sets it next to her. She fumbles for it and works the rotary around his number.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Wheeler? Hi, it's El—”

“Oh, hey, sweetie,” Karen chirps. “Mike just left to go get you, don't worry. I know he is, though, believe me.”

El purses her lips. “Okay,” she replies, as brightly as possible. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Karen replies. “Have a nice night, honey.”

“Thank you.”

El drops the phone into its cradle. Hopper’s still standing over her, eyebrows raised expectantly.

“He’s already on his way,” El gripes, but it’s honestly not surprising; he’s always a little early, eager to see her or worried he won’t be on time. She can’t help but feel guilty, though.

He’s driving all this way, just to find her an immovable mess in her living room, bundled in blankets and watching AFV.

Hopper sighs. “I figured,” he says. “Want me to order you guys something to eat?”

Hope fills her. “He can stay? I thought you were leaving.”

He’d asked her like, eight times if she’d be okay. And of course she will; it’s just cramps.

“I’m not really worried about you two getting up to anything when you’re... like this,” he grins. “Unless, of course, this is all some ploy to be alone—”

“Hop!”

“I’m *kidding!* Jesus!”

El settles back against the cushions, wincing. Hopper leans down and ruffles her hair. “Just make sure you eat something, huh?”

Her lips tighten. “The thought of food makes me want to vomit.”

“Okay,” he holds his hands up. “Just try, for me?”

His worry is endearing, rather than suffocating. They’d found a balance long ago.

El shrugs. "Say hi to Joyce for me," she tells him.

Hopper grunts, which is his way of neither confirming nor denying what she constantly suspects. El watches as he shuffles around, grabbing his things.

"You want me to wait until he gets here?"

"No," she waves him off. "Just go. Have fun."

Hopper salutes her and then steps out. She's left alone in the house with nothing but the TV for company, which she hates more than anything.

Still, it's better than silence. She's always thought that. Better than nothing

(grey walls,
white tile
one light
'today, we make contact')

El curls into the couch cushions, grasping the fabric, trying to ground herself.

She hates this. She hates how the bad descends upon her with such a suddenness that it strikes her like lightning

('repeat the words, eleven'
water
cold
darkness)

"Stop," she sobs, curling up into an even tighter ball. The images and words flash through her brain nonetheless, utterly indomitable. She can see him, feel his cold detached touch; sandpaper smooth hands, pure white hair. He was bland on the outside, but piercing to her. Like a hawk, he watched her even as she slept. He studied her. He used her. He branded her.

"Stop!"

Too many thoughts. Too much bad. It was all she knew, everyday; nothing and then awful and then sleep. Sleep where she dreamed of nothing

{the vaguest impressions, the slightest images that were stored in her heart with her very first breath; dark curls, a bright smile, even brighter light, his hand and her hand; she knows him, his joy, his coming, his touch}

Eleven's fingers rake over the numbers on her arm. She scratches, scratches, scratches, but it won't do anything. She can't scrape away something that's part of her.

Minutes pass. Half an hour. Her breathing only gets more strained as she tries to fight away the memories.

Then something is touching her.

Eleven breathes.

She breathes in old, stale cigarette smoke soaked into the very fabric of the cushion. She jerks away from the hand (*Papa*), eyes wide.

But it's not Papa.

"Mike," she sobs.

He grabs her hands, urgently pulling her closer. "Hey," he wraps his arms around her, "what happened? El?"

El.

Right.

She falls into him, into his warmth. His shirt is soft against her wet cheek. "Sorry," she whispers.

"Don't be," his voice is gentle, just like always. Like that first night, those first words.

Are you okay?

“Are you okay?”

El sobs. It can't be helped, really, because she realises just then how much has changed. She'd been small and scared and alone, and now she's...

A person.

Mike pushes her hair from her eyes and holds her, bowed over her, sheltering her. He'd given her a home when he'd taken her hand. He's all she'll ever really need.

“Thank you,” she nestles further into his chest, still tearful, and sniffs. “Thank you, thank you, *thank you...*”

“What for?”

“Being here,” she says, and she doesn't just mean now, she means forever.

He seems to get that.

“Always, Shortstack,” he says. It's a promise.

Mike thumbs her cheeks. “Wanna talk about it?”

She shakes her head. She can't. “I...”

It's then that El remembers their date. The one he's here for, wearing a button down and her favourite cologne (the one that makes her literally melt). It's almost enough to get her to forget the bullshit.

“I had cramps,” she blurts. “I tried calling, but you'd already left.”

“Oh,” his cheeks flame, for some reason. “Well, that's okay. We can just stay here.”

“Really?”

Mike nods earnestly. Her shoulders drop in relief. “Scoot over, *mamacita*.”

El rolls her eyes, but obliges. “You're sure you don't like, hate me for

ruining our date?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

She eyes him. “Half?”

Mike blinks. “C’mere,” he puts his arms around her waist and guides her into him. The weight of him against her stomach is more than pleasant. He runs his hands up and down her abdomen. “I would literally sit in a dumpster and call it fun as long as I was with you, okay?”

El giggles. She feels his chest vibrate against her back, and then his lips meet her cheek. “I love you.”

“Okay,” she snuggles into him, “just checking.”

Hopper finds them all entwined like that, under blankets, and asleep.

El will forget; it won’t occur to her that the drive from Mike’s house to her own is only ten minutes, meaning he was gone an extra half hour. She’ll doesn’t see the small grey box tucked into the centre console of his car (won’t for over a year).

But it’s there. Waiting.

He’s waiting.

-

six

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“Got ’em!”

El thrusts out the papers as she slips into the station wagon. Mike grabs for them eagerly, eyed scanning the fine print before she even has the car door closed.

She unfolds her own, which she’d resisted doing on their promise.

“First period?” Mike asks.

“English,” she reads. “Mr. Murran.”

“Yes,” Mike scoots over so that he’s right next to her, looking between their schedules.

They had first, third, and fifth period together. It’s not the best, but it’s better than nothing.

(And there’s lunch. And study hall. And the dark room.)

Mike chews his lip. His gaze drifts to the high school building, complative.

“What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know,” he sighs. “Just not ready to go back.”

El hums in agreement. God, does she get that; nothing has been better than these last few months. Nothing has been better than the freedom of spending so much time with him, not tied down by assignments and classes.

“We have a week,” she reminds him.

“Yeah,” Mike curls a strand of her hair around his finger. Something shifts between them in a heartbeat. His eyes intensify and darken.

Fuck it.

El clambers over and straddles his lap, relishing in his gasp of surprise. The kiss is ardently amorous; hot, breathy, and impassioned. So good. So, so good.

El brushes the tip of her nose against his as she pulls away.

He’s so cute, she thinks. Her finger brushes the freckles on his cheeks, now countless after the summer (which she secretly loves, even if it makes him self conscious.)

Mike’s head falls against her chest. His hands play with the hem of her shirt, lifting it slightly. His fingers brush her skin and make her shiver.

Just his touch. That's all it takes. Just a look, a devil-may-care grin, and she falls apart.

It's getting to be too much; this inability to hold back when it comes to Mike Wheeler. Either she's all over him, or he's all over her, and they've come so close to being caught in the act one too many times.

Still, it won't stop her.

And also, they're sort of alone right now.

The parking lot is empty, anyway; only a few other cars to be seen, in spaces far off from their own. No people, no pigeons, just her and her dorky boyfriend.

El settles her weight on his lap, playing with the hairs at the nape of his neck. "You wanna go somewhere or stay here and have sex on school property?"

Mike snorts a laugh. "Go where?"

"The lake?"

"Oh, so you were *serious* about the sex part."

"Yeah," she smiles, "obviously."

Mike shrugs. "Sometimes I can't tell," he says. "Still not used to it. But I needed to ask you something."

El leans back so she can see him all the better. "What is it?"

"I was thinking," his tongue pokes out to grace his lower lip, "what if I joined the swim team?"

Swim team? Like, he'd be practising in the easily accessible school pool all the time? Without a shirt? All wet and toned and—

"I think it's a great idea," she grins.

"Really?" Mike brightens. "I was worried it was stupid. I mean, I'm not the most athletic, we both know that," he rolls his eyes, "but I'm

pretty good in the water.”

He can even outrace Lucas, which isn't true of any other sport, so it's sort of saying something.

“Go for it,” she nods. “Even if you don't get in, at least you tried.”

Mike smiles up at her. It's one of those totally adoring, heart melting kinds. “I love you, you know that?”

“Yeah,” she wraps her arms around his neck. “I know.”

(it's a truth that will remain known for a long, long time; one that must have been written as some untenable law of the universe, because their love lasts longer than now, than later. it lasts lifetimes, stretches across galaxies and universes and planes, finding home in their hearts.)

Author's Note:

If you're still here, thanks for sticking around!

I apologise if this was a little out of your guys' comfort zones. I tried to be as vague as possible, because the last thing I wanna do is like, write full on mileven smut.

Anyway, I was going over my timeline (you guys... it's so inconsistent and I'm so sorry oh my god) and I realised I skipped over an entire fuckin summer so I was like WHY NOT and here this is.

Thank you so much for reading!! Feedback makes my day!

Come scream with me on tumblr: @mad-maxxy!